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STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND INSURANCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 22, 2007

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Tennessee 911 Board Leads Effort To Curb Bogus Calls

NASHVILLE, TN-- In response to the growing national problem of harassing and fraudulent 911 calls, the Tennessee Emergency Communications Board (TECB) has decided to take action. Discarded and disconnected cell phones are being used to call 911, whether by accident or as a prank. Non-emergency calls from these phones can prevent anyone with a real emergency from connecting with a call center and receiving immediate attention.

The TECB filed a petition on February 14, 2008 with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requesting an examination of its call forwarding rule and the ability of wireless carriers to block fraudulent 911 calls from these phones. Under current FCC mandate, all 911 calls from cell phones that have been discarded or disconnected for non-payment must be forwarded to a 911 call center. Possibly numbering in the millions, these wireless devices (non-initialized phones or NSI devices) are no longer served by a telecommunications carrier and can be difficult to trace.

According to TECB Executive Director Lynn Questell, current policy can have a devastating impact on emergency response systems.

"We're talking about every cell phone that's ever been replaced and stuck in a drawer, given to a child as a toy, even pulled out of a garbage heap," said Questell. "Right now, anyone who picks up a phone like that and punches in 911 – whether intentionally or not – is connected to a call center. And that means that call takers are increasingly being tied up with bogus 911 calls while people with real emergencies wait in line."

In Tennessee alone, Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs, or 911 call centers) reported receiving more than 10,000 911 calls from NSI devices in just three months. Fewer than 200 of those were legitimate emergency calls. Many of the non-emergency calls were made by repeat callers, with a great number appearing to be made by children.

"The calls divert essential, life-saving resources from callers seeking emergency assistance," cautions TECB chairman Randy Porter. "Consider how many phones are taken out of service every day, and you can see how the problem grows. This is one of the most critical issues facing 911 today."

Joining the TECB in filing the petition with the FCC are the National Emergency Number Association, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International, the National Association of State 911 Administrators, the Michigan State 911 Office, the New Jersey State 911 Commission, the Montana 911 Program, the Washington State E911 Program, the Snohomish County, Wash., Enhanced 911 Office, and Openwave Systems, Inc.

The Tennessee General Assembly increased the penalty for aggravated use of 911 for non-emergency calls during the 2007 session. For more information on the Tennessee Emergency Communications Board, visit www.state.tn.us/commerce/911 or call 615-253-2164.

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